

# Taking Control: Developing Positive Coping Mechanisms

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The teen years are a time of major life crises. You are experiencing physical changes that are stressful, developing your own beliefs and values, and developing relationships that may be long lasting. You have endless demands on your time and are bombarded by new challenges every day. No wonder you are stressed! As you have seen, there are many contributing factors to stress and several negative ways to deal with stress that often only compound our stress. Perhaps some of the positive coping mechanisms presented here will prove to be helpful. Underlying all of these is one recurring theme—you are not alone. Regardless of what your stressors are and how hopeless things may seem, talking with someone will help. Give it a try. Dealing with stress in a positive manner can be hard work. Here are suggestions that will help you develop positive coping mechanisms.

## Learn to Like Yourself

Having a positive self-image and strong self-esteem is a prerequisite for developing positive coping skills. How do you improve your self-image and boost your self-esteem? The first step is to list things you like about yourself. As you do that, you will undoubtedly think of things you don't like about yourself. The second step is to change the things you don't like. Start with changes that are easy to make, like getting a new hairstyle or a few new clothes. Take a positive approach to things that are harder to change—your weight, for instance. Think of these changes as challenges rather than obstacles.



As you improve your self-image, you will start to improve your self-esteem. Here are other ways to strengthen your self-esteem:

- Use positive self-speak. You constantly have mental conversations with yourself. If you bad-mouth yourself, you soon start to believe you are a bad person. Put a positive spin on your self-conversations.
- Be tolerant of your own mistakes. Nobody is perfect. It is easy to be excessively critical of yourself. If you make a mistake, admit that you did, learn from the experience, and then let it go.
- Acknowledge your accomplishments. Make a habit of recognizing even the smallest of your accomplishments every day. Make a list of them—even if they don't seem very important. By recognizing and being proud of your accomplishments, you begin to understand your self-worth.

- Be assertive. Being able to let others know what you think and feel is important. After all, what you have to say is just as important as what others have to say. So, say what you think, but also listen to others and respect their opinions.
- Spend time with people who value you. The people you choose to be around are often mirrors of how you feel about yourself. If others are constantly putting you down, you're running with the wrong crowd!

## Take Control

With your self-image buffed and your self-esteem maximized, you are ready to deal with stress and make it work for you. Here are a few steps to help you take control:

### Define the Problem

Making plans to deal with stress is difficult if you don't know what is causing it. Spend several days jotting down things that cause you stress. Then, make a definitive list of your major stressors. Just recognizing a stressor may actually make it less stressful.

### Learn to Manage Time



One of the main stressors identified by teens is the lack of time to do everything that is expected of them. True, teens are busy, but much of the problem lies in poor time management. Make daily and weekly schedules to manage your time more efficiently. Start by listing daily and weekly activities you absolutely must do, like classes, band practice, and student council meetings, for example. After you get all of the "must dos" into your schedule, fill in some of the uncommitted time slots with things you should do, like getting started on the research for a term paper. You are in charge of the schedule, so build time into it for everything, including "alone" time, family time, etc. Keep this schedule with you so you can update it as needed. No schedule is perfect, but if you stick with it most of the time, you will find even an incredibly busy schedule to be much less stressful than it was before.

### Learn to Say No

Most people agree to do a lot of things they really don't want to do simply because they think they should. Some of these are unavoidable, especially those that your parents and teachers ask you to do, but others are not. Rather than agreeing immediately to being on another committee or participating in another after school activity, think about your motivation for doing so. If you really have no interest in the activity or time for it, say no. Guard your time—no one else will.

### Practice and Prepare

One of the most stressful things you can do is to approach an event without being prepared. If you always wait until the last minute to prepare a speech or study for a

test, you will be under a lot more stress than if you prepare ahead of time. By being prepared, you can harness your stress and make it work for you.

### **Finish What You Start**

You can minimize stress by making a concerted effort to finish each project or chore as it comes along, rather than putting it off. Break big chores into a group of smaller tasks that can be completed in a reasonable time. Soon the entire project will be done, and you will get a great deal of satisfaction from checking it off of your list.

### **Be Good to Your Body**

Coping with outside stressors if you are physically stressed is very difficult. The “big three” of staying physically healthy are: eat right, get enough sleep, and get plenty of exercise.

#### **Eat Right**

Stress reactions require your body to expend tremendous amounts of energy. Where do you get this energy? From food, of course. Fast food, snacks, and sodas won't hack it. They are high in calories, fats, and caffeine, and low in basic nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. Take the time to eat well-rounded meals and save the junk food for occasional treats. Your body also needs a lot of water to keep its systems working. Most teens do not drink enough fluids and border on being dehydrated much of the time. Extreme tiredness, crankiness, slight nausea, and faintness are some signs of dehydration. They can be corrected quickly by simply drinking water.

#### **Get Enough Sleep**

How much is enough? Most people need between seven and eight hours of sleep each night. Few get that much sleep. Teens tend to fall asleep later at night and, if their schedules allow, sleep later in the morning than do adults or young children. If, however, they can't sleep late, they may become sleep deprived. Sleep deprivation leads to impairment in judgment and the ability to think, and may also lead to impairment in motor skills and reaction times. This can have serious consequences, especially if sleep-deprived teens are driving.

#### **Get Plenty of Exercise**

Exercise can decrease stress by causing increased production of endorphins, which are natural opioids found in the brain. This gives a natural “high” to counterbalance the lows of stress. Exercise is also an outlet for all the pent-up energy that stress produces. By expending the energy productively, you are less likely to react impulsively and violently in stressful situations.

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